Andreas Weber’s Reward for Success in an International Assignment – A Return to an Uncertain Future

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Andreas Weber’s mind would not stop racing. Normally, an intense run in the evening had the effect of dissipating his worries, but tonight this did not work. The further he jogged along his standard route on the banks of the Hudson River, the more he could not get out of his mind the letter he knew he must write tomorrow. “How had it all come to this?” he wondered. This thought triggered his memory back seven years, to the initial event that had set in motion the process that led to his current trouble.

Andreas’ Decision to Pursue an International Career

Andreas remembered the occasion clearly; Herr Görner, the Managing Director, had walked into his office at the Frankfurt headquarters of his bank, and offered him the chance to participate in a company-wide international leadership development program. Herr Görner explained that the program involved an international assignment with the intention of fostering the professional development of young, aspiring managers. After their overseas assignments, the trainees would constitute a pool of internationally experienced young managers with the potential for senior management positions at corporate headquarters. Andreas accepted the offer on the spot, with pride. He had worked very hard since joining the bank and felt that his efforts had finally paid off.

The program started with a one-week seminar at a leading business school in the United States. The CEO had flown in from Frankfurt, demonstrating the commit­ment of top management to this program. In his speech to the participants, the CEO stressed that the major challenge and “number one” priority for the bank in the future was globalization. He made it clear that international experience was a key value and a prerequisite for promotion into the ranks of senior management. Andreas felt confident that he had made the right decision in accepting the offer and in pursuing an international career.

Shortly after the program started, an unexpected vacancy opened up in the bank’s New York branch and Andreas was asked if he was interested. He discussed the prospect of a three-year assignment to New York with his wife, Lina. The offer looked very attractive from all angles, and they quickly agreed that Andreas should accept it. Two months later, he was transferred to New York.

Assignment New York: The First Year

Andreas remembered the day of his arrival as if it were yesterday. He arrived at JFK Airport early in the afternoon. Since his only contact point about the job assignment was corporate HR in Frankfurt, he assumed that they had made all the necessary arrangements with the New York office for his arrival. However, no one came to the airport to pick him up. He took a taxi and went directly to the New York branch of the bank. When he arrived, he was not sure where he should go. He had not been informed about whom he should contact after his arrival, so he went straight to the office of the head of the corporate finance department where he was supposed to work. When he entered the office and told the secretary that he was the new manager from Germany, she looked at her notebook, shook her head, and told him that they were not expecting anybody. Confused, Andreas rushed to the HR department and soon found that several misunderstandings had occurred. First, it was not the corporate finance department but the credit department that had requested his transfer. Second, contrary to what he was told in Frankfurt, there was only a non-management position vacant. They were looking for a credit analyst, basically the same job that he had done in Germany.

Andreas shook his head in reaction to the memory: “There I stood, in what was supposed to be my new office, with three pieces of luggage on the desk, and wondering whether I should stay or take the next plane home!”

Why he decided to stay in New York, he could never quite figure out. In retrospect it was probably just a split-second decision to make the best of the situation. The whirl of images of the next two months flashed across his memory: rushed days and nights trying to learn the ropes of a new office with new procedures, looking for a place to live, meeting new people, and exploring new places. Then a clear memory intervened the collage of memories of those first two months – Lina’s arrival. Lina, his wife, and their three-year-old daughter, Anne-Marie, followed Andreas to New York two months after his arrival. They moved into a small house in the outskirts of New York. Lina knew New York pretty well, as she had worked there for a couple of months as an intern at a reinsurance company. She arrived excited to re-discover her favorite restaurants, art galleries and museums.

Except for occasional attacks of homesickness, Lina was satisfied with her new life. The week after they had moved into their new house, they received a dinner invitation from a young married couple next door. To their surprise, their American neighbors quickly embraced the Webers. Since Lina was not able to get a work permit, she joined her new acquaintance in doing volunteer work at a local art museum. Anne-Marie spent every second afternoon at a local kindergarten, which gave Lina plenty of time to pursue her own interests. At the end of their first year in the United States, a second daughter, Elena, was born. By then, the Weber’s had already made several more new friends, both Americans and other expatriates. When the Webers stepped off the plane at JFK after their first home leave to Germany, it felt more like they were coming home than returning to a temporary assignment.

Andreas’ Fast-Track Career as an Expatriate

Professionally, things had gone extremely well during this time period. The New York branch of the bank had been right at the start of a boom-phase that lasted for several years. Throughout the boom, the bank’s staff increased significantly. After eight months of working in the back office, Andreas was promoted to supervisor of a group of credit analysts. Then, one year after his first promotion, a position opened up at the senior management level. The deputy head of the rapidly expanding corporate finance department – a German expatriate – had unexpectedly left for a job at one of their American competitors, and the bank had to fill his position with a manager who spoke fluent German, was familiar with the finance departments of a number of German and other European companies, and was instantly available. Andreas was asked if he was willing to extend his foreign service contract for another three years and accept the position as deputy head of the corporate finance department. After discussing it with Lina, Andreas accepted.

In the fifth year of his assignment, Andreas made another step upward in his career. His boss retired, and Andreas was promoted to head of the corporate finance department. He was now one of five managing directors in the branch. When Andreas signed his new contract, it was agreed that he would stay with the New York branch of the bank for another three years and would then return to the bank’s German headquarters.

These were warm memories, memories that somewhat buffered the intensity of Andreas’ frustration and anger over his current situation. But as he continued running, the warmth of the past dissipated into the turmoil of the present.

“It all started with that promotion,” he muttered to himself. As head of the corporate finance department, Andreas’ professional and private lives had unexpectedly changed. He was now responsible for a huge area – his business activities no longer concentrated on North American subsidiaries of foreign-based companies, but included also their headquarters in Europe and East Asia. In the first six months of his new job, Andreas had traveled almost 100,000 miles, mainly on business flights to Europe. His extensive traveling was hard on Lina. She felt alone and was concerned about their children’s education. Their eldest daughter, Anne-Marie was now nine years old and had spent most of her life outside of Germany. Lina was also concerned about her missing out on a German high school education. Anne-Marie’s German language skills had gradually deteriorated over the last two years, and that troubled Lina as well. Their second daughter, Elena, was attending kindergarten, and except for the yearly home leave, she had no contact with other German children. Elena’s German was quite poor. In fact, both Anne-Marie and Elena considered themselves Americans.

Lina also started to be more and more discontented with her life as a housewife. Obtaining a work permit in the United States remained impossible, and it was not easy for her to find new volunteer activities to quench her interests. To make things worse, Lina’s father fell ill and died in that same year, leaving her mother alone. Andreas remembered the long conversations he had had with Lina during this period of time, many of which were by telephone from hotel rooms in far-away places. When he was home, they spoke often in the quiet of their living room, and on long walks – Andreas lost count of the multitude of times they had talked as they walked through the same park he was now running through.

Andreas’ Dilemma: Staying in New York or Returning Home to an Uncertain Future

“It was an extremely difficult situation,” Andreas remembered, “not so much for the children, but for Lina and I. … From a professional standpoint, my assignment to New York was the best thing that could ever happen to me: I worked in the financial center of the world; I loved my job, the freedom of being away from the bureaucracy at corporate headquarters, the opportunities to travel; I became a member of the senior management team at a very young age – impossible if I stayed in Germany. Personally, we were also happy: our children felt at home in New York; we were quickly embraced by our neighbors and the expatriate community; we had many friends… The question we continually wrestled with was: ‘Does it make sense to give all these up for a return to an uncertain future in Germany?’ In principle, the answer would clearly have been: ‘No’. But on a long-term basis, moving back to Germany appeared to be the best solution for our children. After all, we felt responsible for their future.”

After several weeks of consideration and discussion, Lina and Andreas decided to move back to Germany. This was about a year ago. Immediately after the decision was made, Andreas contacted the bank’s corporate headquarters and informed the human resource executive in charge of international assignments about his decision. Three weeks later, Andreas received a short letter from him, stating that there were currently no positions available in Germany at his level. Part of the problem, Andreas was told, was due to the current economic downturn in Europe, but since several new branches were due to be opened in the Eastern part of Germany over the course of the next year, he was told that chances were good that the company would be able to find him a suitable return assignment within the next six months. Since then, Andreas had had several meetings with executives at corporate headquarters, as well as with managers of domestic branches of the bank, but he still had not been offered any reentry position.

Lina gradually became discouraged. She had told her mother that they were coming home immediately after they made their decision to return to Germany, but 8 months had passed, and her mother kept asking when they were coming. Andreas’ parents were persistent in their queries as well. Finally, last week, Andreas received a telephone call from the corporate HR department, in which he was informed that they had found what they called a “challenging” return assignment. They offered him the position of deputy head of a medium-sized branch of the bank in the Eastern part of Germany. Andreas was told that a letter explaining the details of the position offer had already been sent.

The Offer

The memory of opening that letter and reading it, and the resulting emotions of anger, betrayal, disbelief, and frustration all came back to him. He stopped running and sat down on a park bench alongside the jogging trail. “Not only will I earn little more than half the salary that I currently make in New York, I will not be able to use the skills and experiences that I gained during my overseas assignment, I will be out of touch with all the important decisions being made at headquarters, and on top of that, I will be posted to this God-forsaken place!” he thought, bitterly.

With all the frustrations and anger welling up in his chest, Andreas thought, cynically, “The bank’s promotion policy – if there ever was any rational policy – is to punish those who are really committed to the organization. They assign you to one of those programs for high-fliers and send you abroad, but there is no career planning whatsoever. If there just happens to be a job vacant when you return, you are lucky. If not, they let you wait and wait and wait, until you finally accept the most ridiculous job offer. ... Their slogan that international experience is a key value and a prerequisite for promotion into the ranks of senior management is garbage! If you look at the actual promotion and career development practices in this organization, it becomes clear it’s only lip service…and lies! … In this bank, the better you perform overseas, the more you get screwed when you come back”.

He began to wonder if he should accept the offer. Perhaps they should just stay in New York and make their home here. But then, images of Lina, Lina’s mother, Anne-Marie, Elena, and his parents, and all of their combined needs enveloped him.

Leaning back on the park bench, he blankly stared down the path that would lead out of the park and into the street, and then home.

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Questions for you to deliberate:

1. Should Andreas Weber accept the position offered? Why, why not? What are his options?
2. In the case of Andreas Weber, the company’s international workforce planning system apparently did not function effectively. What went wrong? What factors contributed to re-entry problems?
3. What can expatriates and companies do to avoid the kind of problems described in this case?